

[Mrs. Virginia S. W. Williamson]

26101 Life History - Jax Mrs Virginia S Williamson Miss Shepherd

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Life history

Mrs. V. S. Williamson,

Room 609, Dyal-Upchurch

Building,

Jacksonville, Florida,

Personal Interview

(Revised and corrected)

Rose Shepherd, Writer

MRS. VIRGINIA S. W. WILLIAMSON

(MRS. ALBERT M. WILLIAMSON)

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Called from her desk in Room 609 Dyal-Upchurch Building, where she has for some time been serving as an editor for the WPA Florida Writers' Project, Mrs. Williamson said she would be very glad to be interviewed covering her interesting life experiences.

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“My great-grandfather was Joseph Branch, a brother of John Branch, who — quoting from a pamphlet ‘John Branch, 1782-1863’ — reprinted from The North Carolina Booklet, October, 1915, and published by the Commercial Printing Co., Raleigh, N. C. — ‘was three times speaker of the Senate of North Carolina, three times Governor of that State, a member of the United States Senate and National House of Representatives, Secretary of the Navy, member of the North Carolina Constitutional Convention of 1835, last Governor of the Territory of Florida, and first Acting Governor of the State of Florida.’

“Joseph Branch and his wife both died, leaving a daughter Susan Simpson Branch, and four sons, all small. They went to [liver?] with Governor Branch, who reared those five orphans exactly as if they were his own children, and he himself was the father of nine sons and daughters.

“Rebecca Bradford Branch, daughter of Governor John Branch, 2.> was born an August 25, 1808, and on April 19, 1831, she married my grandfather, Robert White Williams, of Tallahassee. After her death he married in 1844, her first cousin, Susan Simpson Branch, (my grandmother), a sister of General Lawrence o'Bryan Branch, a distinguished officer of the Confederate Army, becoming later a Brigadier-General.

“The Branches and Williams, Simpsons and o'Bryans were of English origin and early settlers of North Carolina.

“Joseph Branch, with his wife, Susan Simpson o'Bryan Branch, left North Carolina in 1827 for Tennessee, where — according to the will of his father, Colonel John Branch — he had been bequeathed ‘ten thousand acres of land in the State of Tennessee on the waters of the Duck River.’ By the same will, my great-grandfather also inherited a 600-acre tract called ‘the Cellar’ or ‘Cellar Field’ — afterwards owned and occupied by his brother, Governor Branch, who probably purchased it outright.

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"On the way Joseph branch died and was buried by his wife and their four sons in the little cemetery at Franklin, a plantation town near Nashville, Tennessee. His widow later married Governor McMinn, of Tennessee. She was my great-grandmother.

"The Williams' also migrated to Tennessee. My great-grandmother Williams was a sister of James Glasgow, who was secretary of the colony of North Carolina. Her children were Willoughby, who lived to be nearly a hundred years of age, becoming prominent in Tennessee, and when Governor Sam Houston resigned as Governor of Tennessee and in a very short time left for Texas where he became famous as a pioneer of that State, it was in Uncle Willoughby's 3. hands that he left his resignation; the second son was my grandfather, Robert White Williams, and the third was Christopher. The others of the Williams' connections I know very little about.

"When he was only 19, my grandfather, Robert White Williams, rode on horseback from Tennessee to Pensacola, Florida where the land office was, and became connected with the office of Surveyor-General. Later his work took him to Tallahassee, which had just been selected as the state Capital, and he surveyed the site and laid out the lots for the city. Eventually, he acquired a great deal of property in what is now Leon County, including two large plantations — one called 'Centerville' and the other 'Horseshoe Plantation'.

"He bought slaves to farm these sections, but never sold them. If one of his slaves married one of another plantation, he always tried to buy the other, and if he could not, he let his go, so that the two would be together.

"One of my earliest recollections concerns my grandmother's book in which she kept a record of the negro children born on the plantations. When I was about seven, I remember negroes used to come from all over that section to see my grandmother and get the birthdates of their children.

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“When in 1825 the Congress of the United States awarded to the Marquis de LaFayette the sum of \$200,000 and a ‘township of land’ in token of his services to the colonies in the Revolutionary War, a township was allotted him out of Government lands near Tallahassee, and my grandfather became his agent.

4.

“General LaFayette never came to Florida, however. According to history, \$80,000 of the money voted to him was used to pay his most pressing debts, and the balance of \$120,000 invested for him in interest-bearing United States bonds, while it was his idea to use the grant of land for colonizing purposes, retaining part as an estate for members of his family. Two or three colonization efforts were made, but they were not successful.

“On page 7 of the February, 1934 number of the Tallahassee Historical Society Annual, in her article on ‘LaFayette and the ‘LaFayette Land Grants.’ Kathryn T. Abbey writes:

‘**** LaFayette yielded to the inevitable pressure of his debts and allotted all [but?] a small portion of his property to be sold. **** Armed with his authority Colonel Robert W. Williams, his agent, concluded the deal with [Nuttall?], Braden, and Craig, November 18, 1833. By its terms the General bonded himself to the sum of \$100,000 to deliver a good and perfect title in fee simple to 26-3/4 sections of the township upon payment to him or his heirs of \$46,520 on or before January 1, 1844, with 7% annual interest. Of the remaining 9-1/4 sections of the township two quarter-sections had already been sold and two other tracts of one section each, spoken for. This left 6-3/4 sections in the hands of LaFayette and his heirs instead of the 1-1/2 sections requested. ****’

“And continued on page 8 — **** ‘When January, 1844, arrived, final payment of the \$42,520 was not possible as the condition of the country was such that concessions had to be made to purchasers or the lands sold at a heavy sacrifice. Gradually, adjustments were worked out, and by 1856 Williams was able to 5. state that enough had been collected

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to discharge the obligation to the heirs. The previous year, the last of the lands originally retained by the LaFayette family were sold.

‘thus ended the long and varied history of LaFayette's township. **** For twenty-four of its thirty-one years of existence, R. W. Williams had been its steward. Only once was a LaFayette in Florida, namely, in 1850 when Edmond de LaFayette and Ferdinand de Lasteyric, grandsons of the Marquis, visited the United States and came South to confer with Williams. The charm of the name still lived, however, for the gentlemen were enthusiastically welcomed and the General Assembly voted Edmond de LaFayette “the hospitalities of the State” and invited him to a “seat within in the bar of either house”. ****’

“On the occasion of the visits of the two grandsons mentioned, young Edmond de LaFayette was invited to address the General Assembly of the Territorial Council, and for many years I kept a sheet of paper on which he had hastily scribbled notes of the speech he made at that time expressing his thanks and appreciation of the gift to his grandfather. My brother in Washington has this treasure now.

“My father, Robert Willbgghby Willoughby Williams, was an only child of Robert White Williams and Susan Simpson Williams. During the War between the States he was a student at the University of North Carolina, at Chapel Hill.

“He was very anxious to enter the war in service with the Confederates, but his parents were opposed on account of his youth.

6.

My grandfather, in addition to the two plantations he owned in Florida, had also acquired a large property in Louisiana about ten miles back from the mississippi River on what is known as Old River in East Carroll Parish. So, his mind made up, my father left Chapel Hill and went to the Louisiana plantation where he joined the Confederate Army and served under General Edmund Kirby-Smoth until the close of the war.

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"In 1865, shortly after hostilities ceased, he married Virginia Sutton, daughter of William Sutton, who owned a large cotton plantation on the Mississippi River which he called 'Vista' about five miles above Lake Providence. They were both very young for such responsibility, he being 19 years old on the 21st of February, [1865?], and she 20 on the 19th of February.

"About three months previous to the wedding, my grandfather, Robert White Williams, died very suddenly in Tallahassee. Due to the condition of the South at that time, news traveled very slowly, but as soon as my father and his bride learned of my grandfather's death, they set out for Tallahassee traveling on horseback, by boats, by stage — any way to get there. They stayed with my grandmother for a short time, when my father had to return to Louisiana to be mustered out. He found his fatherinlaw, Mr. William Sutton, in very poor health, and shortly afterwards he died. While my father had always considered Tallahassee his home, having been born in the house built by his father in 1831, when he learned he and another soninlaw had been made executors of Mr. Sutton's estate, he returned again to Louisiana and operated the 'Vista' plantation for a number of years. " During this time, the summers of the family were spent in Tennessee, where grandmother Williams had been made lady principal of the Ward Seminary, an exclusive school for young ladies, now continued under the name of the Ward-Belmont College, of Nashville. During one of these summers I was born in Columbia, Tennessee — July 8, 1869 — in the home of Mrs. Mary Polk Branch, widow of grandmother's brother, Joseph Branch, who had been Attorney-General of Florida in 1845-7.

"Her father, William Julius Polk, had six brothers. All of them with the exception of his oldest brother, Thomas, located in Mississippi, lived within a few miles of each other in Tennessee. In 1837, on a site donated by the youngest brother, Andrew, on the family estate in Murray County, these seven Polks built for the community St. Johns Episcopal Church. In her book, 'A Genealogical Record and Annals of my Past,' Mary Polk Branch refers to this little church as 'the most historic church in Tennessee. It lifts its ivy-crowned

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head as if to tell its tragic story. Around its walls fought Confederate soldiers, upon its floor were laid the dying and dead, at its feet rests the soldier at peace, after his unavailing struggle.'

"In this little church I was baptized by Bishop Quintard, who was a close friend of the family, and I have a photograph of the Bishop given my father for me on that day.

"During my father's residence in Louisiana he was very prominent, being for a number of years president of the Police Jury of East Carroll Parish — the law-making and governing board of the Parish, and considered a great responsibility.

"My father, however, always considered himself a Floridian and Tallahassee his home, so in January, 1883 he moved back there to remain permanently.

"In 1876, when I was about seven years old, my sister and I spent the winter with our grandmother in Tallahassee, although we had spent much time with her in Tennessee, where her school duties required her to live.

"I never attended public schools. When we were with grandma she taught us; at other times, while in Louisiana, we had governesses, two of whom I remember with affection — Miss Carrie Franklin, of San Antonio, Texas, and Miss Addie [Moss?], of Boston, Massachusetts. Miss "Addie" was an accomplished musician and taught us, as well as our mother, who was a musician. When we came to Tallahassee to reside permanently in 1883, Grandma was our teacher. I cannot remember when I began to study, as Grandma thought a child was never too young to learn, nor too old to continue to do so.

"The first important event registered in my memory, in connection with public affairs, was the inauguration of Governor William D. Bloxham, in 1881. That day it poured torrents of rain, and instead of taking the oath of office on the east portico of the capitol, all ceremonies had to be held in the hall of the House of Representatives. The Bloxham home was just across the street from ours.

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"From that time on I have had personal acquaintance with every succeeding Governor of Florida, and have attended the inauguration ceremonies of all except the present Governor [Cone?], and one or two others that occurred at times when temporary absence from the State prevented our going to Tallahassee.

9.

"Ellen Call Long and Mary Call Brevard, daughters of Governor Richard [K.?] Call, were intimate life-long friends of grandmother. Jennie Brevard, (Mrs. Thomas Darby). and Alice Brevard, (Mrs. George Gwynn), were the associates of my sister and me.

"I knew all of the old families in Tallahassee — the Shepherds, Beards, Winthrops, Williams, Hopkins. To enumerate my friends and associates would be like a roll call of these people, prominent in the life of the State capital and in Florida affairs.

"I finished school at sixteen and became my father's secretary.

"In 1893, I married Mr. Albert [M.?] Williamson, who was in Tallahassee representing the 9th Senatorial District composed of Citrus, Pasco, and Hernando Counties. As a bride, I went to live on an orange grove in Citrus County. That was in the fall of 1893. In December, 1894 there was a bad freeze which destroyed all the citrus fruit.

"In January, 1895 my baby was born, and in February, 1895 a second freeze came which destroyed the grove. Following the freeze we moved to Inverness, the county seat of Citrus County, where Mr. Williamson owned and published a weekly paper, in existence now as the Citrus County Chronicle.

"In April, we went to Tallahassee for the legislative session, as Mr. Williamson was still senator from the 9th District. Just at the close of that session, in fact, the day after, our baby died in Tallahassee.

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“The opportunity came for Mr. Williamson to sell the newspaper, and in December, 1895 we came to Jacksonville to live. Temporarily, Mr. Williamson took a position with the New York Life Insurance Company. But he soon went back into the business of journalism, operating a plant for J. M. Barrs, Pleasant Holt, and his associates, whose names I have now forgotten, a weekly paper devoted to legal advertisements. A few years later, he bought the Floridian which had been established in Tallahassee in 1824, and moved it to Jacksonville. Having had experience as secretary to my father for six years before I was married, I told Mr. Williamson I would assist him in his work. Before the fire, I did not actually work in the office, except to read proof once a week. As a result of the fire in May, 1901, we lost everything. Then I told my husband if he would build a house where we could have the office right in our home, I would work in the office for him. He built the concrete house with basement at 213 East Adams Street, now having the number of 211. The printing office was in the basement. We needed a linotype machine, and I told him if he would purchase one, I would learn to operate it. With the assistance of a friend employed on the Jacksonville Metropolis who came to our office after hours. I learned to use the linotype.

“Until November, 1918 I worked side by side with my husband in every department of his weekly newspaper.

“In the meantime, my mother in declining years, spent part of her time with us, and part with other relatives. She had this old home in Tallahassee — in all the years there had never been 11. a debt against it, and naturally she wanted to go back there permanently.

“Of this historic home in Leon County, the February, 1934 number Vol, I. of the Tallahassee Historical Society, page 41, contains the following:

‘OLD HOMES IN TALLAHASSEE

By Evelyn Whitfield Henry,

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ROBERT W. WILLIAMS

(419 North Calhoun St.)

‘Perhaps the oldest house standing at /the present time in Tallahassee is the Williams home on the S. E. corner of Calhoun and Carolina Streets.

“It was begun in April, 1831 by Col. Robert W. Williams as the home for his bride, Rebecca Branch. It stood alone on the whole block, surrounded by beautiful gardens. Some of the old shrubs are still blooming in the yard.

‘Colonel Williams was acting as Surveyor-General for the Territory of Florida during the time the grand of land was given by the United States to General LaFayette. When General LaFayette decided to sell the land, Col. Williams acted as his agent. In 1850 General LaFayette's grandson came to Tallahassee and visited in several of the homes here. He was greatly pleased with the manner in which Col. Williams was handling the LaFayette estate, and when he returned to France he tried to express his appreciation in a gift to Col. Williams. The gift was two blank marble mantels; these are still in the old house.

‘When the War came on, the War between the States, Dr. English brought to Tallahassee a wounded Virginia soldier, 12. a young boy, who hoped to have his health restored in our mild climate. He was Capt. John H. Beall. One night Dr. English came to play chess with Colonel Williams, and brought Captain Beall along. Soon the older men became so absorbed in their game they did not miss the young people, and Captain Beall persuaded another guest of the home, Miss Martha o'Bryan, to stroll through the gardens with him. They fell in love that night and had planned to be married, when Captain Beall was taken by the Yankees and hanged on Governor's Island, New York.

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‘After the War, General Foster took charge of the town with the Federal troops. He had expressed the desire, which was the same as a command, to have the Williams home for his headquarters.

**** When General Foster moved in, he ordered a United States flag hung across the street in front of the house. The flag was so large it filled the whole street. It was hung very low and everyone who went that way had to pass under the flag. General Foster stayed, in this house until he was moved to St. Augustine.

‘the house was closed for many years. Finally the family came back from Louisiana.

(It is still, after 100 years, in possession of the Williams family.’

“So,” continued Mrs. Williamson, “when my mother desired so much to return to this old home in Tallahassee in 1918, Mr. Williamson and I decided it was right for me to go with her, and let him close out the business here and come to Tallahassee later on.

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“The Armistice came, and he was delayed much longer than he had anticipated in closing up his affairs in Jacksonville. Finally he made the necessary arrangements, and on coming to Tallahassee was stricken with an illness that kept him confined to his bed for two years.

“In the meantime, I had taken a position in the office of [R.?] C. Crawford, Secretary of State for Florida, in March, 1921, acting as secretary to Mr. Crawford for about six years. Then I was secretary to Mr. Guyte McCord, Tallahassee City Attorney, until September, 1928.

“Mr. Williamson had secured a position in the office of Fleming Bowden, Duval County Tax Collector, in Jacksonville, and in September, 1928 we returned to this city.

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"We had always retained our citizenship in Jacksonville, returning here from time to time to vote when necessary.

"In a short time I was offered and accepted a position as secretary to Mr. Frank Owen, a member of the Jacksonville City Commission, which I held for two years, or until May, 1929. Mr. Owen was not a candidate for re-election, as he had decided to retire from politics, and I remained as secretary to Ernest Anders, the newly elected commissioner in charge of Jacksonville public utilities, my duties also including those of chief clerk to [?]. Z. Tyler, of the electric light and water department, as the two offices had been combined.

"I was in this position from June, 1929, until January, 1930, when I went with Mr. Owen in his private office in which he handled various utility projects. He was treasurer of the Florida Inland Navigation District; president of the Pinellas Water Co., which installed the present water system of the city of St. Petersburg, Florida; also president of utilities in Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. As part of his activities, he built the electric line that goes to Myrtle Beach in South Carolina.

"That position I held until Mr. Owen's death in December, [1935.?)

"Meanwhile, Mr. Williamson had been appointed by Senator Duncan U. Fletcher, of Florida, as an usher in the United States Senate, in Washington. After Mr. Owen's death, I went to Washington and was there during three sessions of Congress, spending my entire time in the Visitors' gallery when Congress was in session.

"When Senator Fletcher died, Mr. Williamson's position came to an end, and he was appointed as a statistician in the Research Division of the WPA in the Florida headquarters in Jacksonville, his work being mainly in connection with the checking of payrolls. He was in this work for almost two years, or until his death in May, 1939, when I was certified by the WPA, and have continuously since been connected with different projects.

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"I might say one of the most interesting things in connection with work on the Floridian, Mr. Williamson's weekly Jacksonville paper, was that after the fire I frequently set in type briefs compiled in the U. S. Circuit Court. One case in which U. S. District Attorney J. N. Stripling represented the government was the Post case, which attracted a great deal of attention. The firm of Bisbee and Bedell represented the Posts, and they were assisted by St. Clair Abrams, John Hartridge, and A. W. Cockrell.

15.

"Also about this time, in 1900, I set the first copies of the first Primary Law of the State of Florida — that is, the new law authorizing elections by a primary. This was under the supervision of Mr. Arthur T. Williams, who was Chairman of the State Democratic Executive Committee, and Mr. J. M. Barrs, Secretary. Several hundred thousand copies were sent out. I did this work personally under their direction while Mr. Williamson was absent, having been called out of town on business.

"My time was given exclusively to this work in the office of the Floridian, and I derived an immense amount of pleasure from this work for the contacts it gave, not only in Jacksonville, but also in Tallahassee.

"And especially did I enjoy my work while connected with the Office of Secretary of State H. C. Crawford, in Tallahassee, for the same reasons.

"On May 20, 1934, — the centennial anniversary of the death of General LaFayette — held by Rollins College, in Winter Park, at which the Counte de Chambrun represented the French Republic, I was also invited as a special guestm on account of the close connection of my grandfather, Col. Robert W. Williams, in his service as agent for the French General in the sale of his Florida property. My brother in Washington has a number of papers and original letters of instruction from LaFayette to our grandfather in regard to the handling of his property.

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"How did Uncle Branch, who had been so prominent in North Carolina, as well as Washington affairs, happen to come to Florida?

16.

"Gov. John Branch was Secretary of the Navy under President Andrew Jackson, who had previously offered him the position of Territorial Governor of Florida, but he declined. On April 19, 1831, he tendered his resignation as Secretary of the Navy.

"In the meantime, his oldest daughter, Martha Lewis Henry Branch, had been married to Dr. Edward Bradford of North Carolina, on November 10, 1825, and they had located in Tallahassee. The glowing letters of Dr. Bradford fired the whole Branch family with enthusiasm for Florida, so in 1836, Givernor and Mrs. Branch, with three sons and two daughters settled on a plantation at Live Oak, three miles from Tallahassee. In addition, there were already living in Florida, Dr. Bradford and his wife, who was Martha Branch; my grandfather, Col. Robert W. Williams, who had married Rebecca Branch; Daniel S. Donelson, a nephew of Mrs. Andrew Jackson, whose wife was Margaret Branch; and Dr. James Hunter, whose wife was Sarah Branch.

"The first tract of land acquired by Governor Branch was a part of the LaFayette grant, December 27, 1833. In 1834, he again returned to Florida, but did not settle here until 1836, all the time, however, retaining his citizenship in North Carolina.

"He and President Tyler were also old time friends, and it was through him that on June 4, 1844 he was appointed Governor of the Territory of Florida, to take effect on the expiration of the commission of Governor Richard [L.?] Call on August 11, 1844. When Florida became a State on the 3d of March, 1845, he became its first acting Governor.

"He was one grand gentleman, as well as statesman, and was always affectionately referred to in our family as 'Uncle Branch.'

17.

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"I think the most important thing within my memory, as far as affecting the entire State of Florida is concerned, was the constitutional convention in Tallahassee in 1885, when an entire new State Constitution was adopted. I attended nearly all the meetings and listened to the speeches pro and con. The Hon. Samuel Pasco, of Monticello, who was afterwards United States Senator from Florida, was the president of this convention. I remember there were one or two negroes from Duval County sent as official representatives, and this was a new experience for me.

"Perhaps one of the most heatedly discussed subjects ever brought before the residents of Florida, however, was the purchase during Governor Bloxham's administration of four million acres of land at twenty-five cents per acre by Hamilton [Bisston?] and his company of New England associates. It paid off the full debt of the Internal Improvement Fund, and this million dollars in Florida's treasury at that time was of much benefit otherwise, although there was a great deal of criticism and intimations that the Governor had provided handsomely for himself out of the proceeds. As for myself, I never believed that, as our family and the Bloxhams were friends and neighbors — our homes were just across the street from each other — and there was never in evidence anything that could be construed as the acquisition of sudden wealth. I never believed there was any justification for the criticism.

"Another outstanding thing I remember very well was the establishment of the State Board of Health during Governor Fleming's administration, after the yellow fever epidemic of 1888.

18.

"Of immense importance, too, was the adoption of the State Primary Law in 1900. I was very much interested in this, and as before stated, set the type and printed the first copies of this important law for State-wide distribution by the Democratic Executive Committee.

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"Governor John Martin's administration coming during the 'boom' period when such a great amount of new money was flowing into Florida was remarkable in many respects. While the 'boom' did not reach Tallahassee, so far as buying and the rapid exchange of property titles was concerned, it caused a great increase in work and personnel around the Capitol. At that time I was in the office of Secretary of State Crawford, where the work had been handled by the chief clerk, his assistant, and three typist, but the 1923 legislature increased this number to twenty-three. This was necessitated for the handling of the tremendous increase in articles of incorporation being filed by new firms entering into business under Florida laws. Ours was probably the busiest office, with the possible exception of the State Land Office.

"At that time they had what was referred to as the Board of State Institutions, handling all business transactions, and called in the capital the 'big Board.' On Tuesdays they considered State lands. Beginning on Mondays the corridor of the Capitol leading to the Governor's office would be crowded with people going there from all over the State, and from other States, who wished to make purchases of State lands. In the excitement, the State often made hundreds of times the value of the land in making the sale.

"Governor Martin, too, was let in for a great deal of 19. adverse criticism, but I can say honestly that Governor Martin really had a big task, and he probably handled it as well as it could have been taken care of by anyone. He did the job very well, indeed.

"At the close of Governor Martin's administration in 1928, I returned to Jacksonville, and have not since been so closely associated with affairs at the capital.

"The New Deal of President Roosevelt's administration of national affairs has been a problem in welfare and economics never before attempted in this country. There was no example to follow, as there had never been a precedent, and while mistakes have probably been made, I am thoroughly in sympathy with all that he has done and tried to

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do. Personally, I am very grateful for the part that has come to me and to my late husband, and like a great many others, I can say, what would we have done without this assistance?

“I feel that one of the greatest contributions to the cultural development of our State and throughout the Nation, has been the Writer's Project, to say nothing of the condition of those who would have been completely stranded without it. I am not well acquainted with the heads of departments of other projects in the educational and cultural brackets, except in the branches of the work with which I have been connected, and I will say that the work of Dr. Carita Doggett Corse, State Director of the Writer's Project for Florida, has been most outstanding as well as conscientious. In all my contacts with her she has impressed / upon me, as well as upon others, the great desire that our work be efficiently done, and that nothing which could not be substantiated be incorporated in our work.”